

State of Michigan  
Families and Human Services Committee  
Testimony of Brian J. De Vos  
Bethany Christian Services  
Tuesday, February 3, 2009

Hello, my name is Brian De Vos. I am the Director of Michigan Operations for Bethany Christian Services, which is headquartered in Grand Rapids, Michigan and the provider of children's services for over 65 years. We serve in over 75 locations in 31 states and are working in more than 12 other countries. Bethany Christian Services of Michigan has a full continuum of child welfare services, including foster care, older child adoption (children adopted from foster care), home-based child abuse prevention, intercounty and infant adoption, counseling, refugee resettlement, and residential treatment. In 2008, we served over 10,000 Michigan children and their families – including over 831 children in foster care and their families. Over 264 Michigan children were placed from foster care into loving, permanent families in 2008 through Bethany Christian Services. Bethany Christian Services is a member of the Michigan Federation for Children and Families. The Federation member agencies have always strived to lead the cutting edge of service excellence. The Settlement Agreement sets in motion a terrific opportunity to implement meaningful changes for the child welfare system in Michigan and most importantly, the children we serve. This blueprint for change is an opportunity to improve the child welfare system and will take the next several years to complete. According to 2007 data, private agency providers played a vital role in serving Michigan's children, caring for over 40 percent of kids in foster care due to abuse and neglect, 80 percent of kids in residential care, and 50-60 percent of kids adopted from foster care into permanent, loving families. Private agency providers also

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provide a vast array of prevention services throughout the state, including Families First. Private agency providers bring many valued-added services to the system. These include obtaining federally-funded contract dollars for programs such as Bethany's Child Trauma Treatment Center, one of 71 such facilities throughout the United States. The main goal of this federal grant is to assist children in foster care, who have experienced multiple traumas, and their parents - reuniting children with their biological families more quickly and more successfully. Bethany also raised over \$2.2 million in 2008, much of which was used to support work done in relationship to state contracts. Michigan has also raised several hundred thousand private donor dollars for a program called Project Open Arms, which focuses on engaging the faith community to respond to the need for families for over 6,000 permanent wards in Michigan who are waiting to be adopted into a permanent, loving family. This intensive recruitment effort is a vital piece in helping to achieve permanency. Thus far, over 250 churches and parishes have received the message calling them to respond to this need. As with any opportunity, there are vital issues. Following are a few such issues we see as a private agency provider responding to the Settlement Agreement:

1. Maintaining a Positive Working Relationship with the DHS

Within the past year, the relationship between the Department of Human Services and private agency providers has been significantly enhanced. The new leadership has been very receptive, open to communication, and responsive to private agency provider's needs, questions, concerns, and suggestions. While we all, public and private, struggle with limited financial resources, teaming together will be crucial if we are to better children's lives. I commend Kathryne O'Grady and Stanley Stewart for their efforts and accomplishments and commitment to children.

2. Child Welfare Investment

While the DHS has added many new positions as a result of the Settlement Agreement, private agency providers also require the same level of investment to achieve successful results. Reimbursement rates for private agency provider foster care, state adoption, and residential treatment services must increase at levels that will meet the new demands of the Settlement Agreement. While many private agency providers have already made structural changes to meet Settlement Agreement requirements, the system of reimbursement must improve in order to cover the costs associated with the new caseload standards, outcome measures, and staff training expectations. We respectfully ask for your support.

3. Training Needs

The Settlement Agreement increased training expectations for foster care, state adoption, and supervisory staff. These expectations are the same for private and public agency providers. Due to increased expectations, we believe this training will need to occur more frequently, be more regionally located, and be accessible to both private and public agency provider staff. While we have seen significant improvement, we support and encourage the development of regionally based Training of Trainers for both private and public agency provider staff. Members in the private agency provider network have the capacity to assist the state in the area of training. We also encourage implementing new methods of training, such as Web-based training methods.

4. Increased Regulation

The Settlement Agreement has heightened the focus on regulation for both public and private providers. More accountability out of the public and private system will

be required. Private agency providers often seek voluntary accreditation, such as COA accreditation, and this requires them to submit to a higher level of standards of care. We also are subject to annual state contract audits, annual state licensing evaluations, as well as internal financial audits. Due to the multiple levels of regulation required of private agency providers, I suggest that there be continued focus on ways to consolidate the required regulations and develop new ways to streamline the regulatory processes. Perhaps there could be one consolidated visit per year that meets all the requirements of the state audits for licenses and contracts.

5. Accurate, Regular, and Consistent Data

I believe we need better, more frequent, and publicly-shared Web-based data regarding our contract outcomes and success toward compliance with contractual outcomes and the Settlement Agreement requirements. This data must be readily accessible to all providers so that we can frequently review and evaluate if we are accomplishing what we intend to accomplish and to see that we are achieving a strong return on our investment.

6. Priorities

I know that you have many priorities. But please remember, most of the children we serve in the child welfare system are at or below the poverty level, they have limited resources, and often times do not have the blessing of a stable, loving, permanent family. While we can analyze all the various causes, we do know that if we do not reach them earlier, there are strong odds that they will eventually enter our adult criminal justice and adult mental health systems – further burdening the state.

## 7. Thank You

Thank you for your efforts and service in the legislature. I encourage you to continue to focus on the needs of the most vulnerable children in Michigan and on ways to **fund services for kids and families so that they will succeed.** We want to send these children a message that they are wanted and that there is help for developing the tools and skills they need to become successful, productive members of society.

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you today.